

HB0525 - County Boards of Education - Student Electronic Communication Device Use Policy - Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)

Written Testimony (Favorable) before Ways and Means Committee

Submitted By: Lindsay Unger

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and esteemed members of the committee,

My name is Lindsay Unger and I am a parent of two children in the Howard County Public School System. As a system of public education, I believe the State has an obligation to make every effort to protect the wellbeing, development, and education of our children. Prohibiting personal device usage in our classrooms is a critical public health need and I am extremely grateful for Delegate Boaf's bill and others in the delegation who have joined his efforts and/or advocated for this issue.

With the amendments that I am aware Delegate Boaf intends to make, HB525 includes key characteristics that are critical in a safe, healthy, and learning-forward policy: 1) it's for the full school day, bell-to-bell, 2) it's for all grades, K-12, 3) it requires the devices fully inaccessible to students and 4) it has exceptions for IEP/504 plans but NOT emergencies and instructional use. Inclusions of these specific elements align with the research we have available to us from child development experts, neuroscientists, and mental health and safety professionals. There are countless publications and expert testimonials all pointing toward the same conclusion. I will share a few references from experts and my own anecdote as a professional career coach at a prominent business school and a member of a district with a policy that is too lenient.

"The Anxious Generation" by Jonathan Haidt leverages extensive research to make many key points about the impacts of the digitization of childhood focusing primarily on cell phone use. Chapter 11 speaks to how the rapid adoption of smartphones and their acceptance in schools has fueled distraction, cyberbullying, and conflict among students. Removing cell phones from schools is one of the key pillars of his recommendation for counteracting the negative effects that a phone-based childhood has had on Gen Z and will be perpetuated with Gen Alpha.

The National Education Association conducted a survey in spring 2024 of 2,889 members working in elementary, middle, and high schools. The published report states that, "Educators who work in schools that allow personal device use find it very disruptive. An overwhelming majority of NEA members—90 percent—support school policy prohibiting cell phone/personal devices during instructional time, and 83 percent support prohibiting cell phone/personal device usage during the entire school day with exceptions for things like medical or assistive-technology needs."

Regarding the need for inaccessibility, this is for two primary purposes. The first point is named in the title of Adrian Ward et. al's 2017 paper, "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity". We have to remember, these devices are designed to maximize engagement and that is why they are addictive and inherently distracting. Second, inaccessibility removes the burden of policy management from the teachers. Anecdotally, this is one of the challenges observed in Howard County with our current policy. There is inconsistent implementation of the policy due to the devices still being physically present in the classroom, putting the burden of noticing and responding to a policy violation on the classroom instructors. I'm sure you can imagine that needing to confront a student trying to access a device that they are addicted to could be a contentious and an ideally avoidable interaction. We are asking too much of our students and teachers when it comes to allowing students to keep their addictive devices on their person or in their classrooms but not access them.

As for the case for safety, I hope you all take the time to read the studies that show that while devices potentially may make students and parents *feel* safer when it comes to mass physical threats, in practice, they are negatively impacting the safety of all students in school-wide emergencies, causing misinformation, additional panic, and network congestion. In October 2025, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) issued [a statement](#) that supports school policies and legislation that bar cell phone access for K-12 students during instructional time.

In support of the point regarding bell-to-bell restriction, I will share my own professional anecdote. As a career coach of business students, I have witnessed the first hand impacts of technology on their career readiness. One area in which there is evident impact is in communication skills and ability to engage and socialize with confidence and ease. I am currently developing a workshop that teaches conversation flow and how to fluidly ask questions in an informational interview. The content is so granular it features basic communication norms such as how to physically and verbally convey engagement. This has become a heightened need observed not only in my specific environment but one discussed among my colleagues across higher education. Students are appearing socially withdrawn and uncomfortable with seemingly basic social interactions. By making personal devices inaccessible from bell-to-bell, we give students a safe and consistent space to engage with their peers and educators in between classes and during the lunch hour without a shield that can strip away their opportunity to develop these communication and social skills necessary to be successful in life.

Cell phones are a tool for communication. They are not built for education. Smartphones are mini computers connecting students to everything outside of their classroom when what matters most during school hours is their connection to their teachers and immediate classmates. Any allotted use in schools, apart from IEP/504 exceptions, would be inequitable to those without access to the device/app.

As this is a matter of public health and safety, the State must put forth legislation that is determined fully by evidence-based research. It is the experts in neuroscience, child development, mental health and safety whose input should be weighted the most. We watch as whole nations around the world pass national legislation prohibiting personal device use in schools, most recently Brazil and South Korea - we are falling behind. We can do better for Maryland. Fortunately, where policies have been put in place, there have been very positive outcomes. The Institute for Families & Technology conducted a [Public Opinion Survey](#) on Voters' Views of Phones in Schools. 91% of parents whose children are in schools with bell-to-ball bans support the policy.

The parameters of the policy must be strictly set at the state-level to ensure an equitable experience across counties - not reliant on differing levels of awareness and education on the topic. Without the specific parameters laid out in this bill, the legislation leaves too many children without health and safety guardrails that are critical to their educational success and development of life skills. Please take this opportunity to make a tremendous difference in the lives of Maryland children.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Unger